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Seiten 59-68

Textanfang

Zionism - origins and organisa

Zionist work in Norway

3. A change? The second half o

A Norwegian and a Jew

Conclusions

Fußnoten

zur Startseite

Zionism Among the Norwegian Jews in the Inter War Period

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Zionism - origins and organisation

Theodor Herzl, the founder of modern Zionism, launched the idea of a Zionist Congress of which the first took place in Basle in 1897. At this congress the Zionist Organization was formed. A year previous to the congress Herzl had published his book *The Jewish State* where he described his ideas of a Jewish national home and why it was necessary. His starting point was that the emancipation had been a failure looking upon Zionism as a Jewish version of the nationalist movements existing at the time. A Jewish national movement was necessary primarily to normalise the Jewish situation. Anti-Semitism was regarded as a potential threat in all societies and there were no guarantees that persecution would not break out again. A Jewish national home would then also be a refuge for persecuted Jews. At the congress it was agreed that "Zionism seeks to secure for the Jewish people a publicly recognised, legally secured home in Palestine for the Jewish people".¹

The Basle congress and the following congresses outlined the methods to achieve the goals, and the major frameworks that were to dominate the organisation were set up. The intention was that every Jewish community should form a Zionist association. The certificate of membership was the *shekel* and a certain number of shekels sold gave the local community the right to participate at the congresses. Until the late thirties this number did not favour countries with a small Jewish population. However, the most important work was to be done by fund-raising. In 1901 *Keren Kajemot Lelsrael* (KKL) was established. Its purpose was to buy land for settlement in Palestine. The scope of work expanded and in 1920 *Keren Hayesod* (KH) was founded to finance activities in Jewish Palestine relating to immigration, settlement, defence and infrastructure. The money should be raised by committees in the local Zionist associations.

Zionism was meant as an expression of the entirety of Judaism and Jewry. But there were differences in opinion about what direction to take to create a Jewish Palestine and what a Jewish Palestine should entail. Consequently the Zionist Organization, which originally was organised territorially, also became organised along party lines. Zionism never became a majority movement but it gained some support.² The Jewish society in Palestine grew because many, in particular East European Jews, made *Aliyah*.³ Furthermore the English, who took over Palestine after the Ottoman empire dissolved during the First World War, acknowledged the Jews' claim by issuing the Balfour Declaration in 1917. The declaration said

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Seiten 59-68

Textanfang**Zionism - origins and organisa****Zionist work in Norway****3. A change? The second half o****A Norwegian and a Jew****Conclusions****Fußnoten****zur Startseite**

that

His Majesty's government views with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine, of the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country.⁴

Zionist work in Norway

Less than 1,500 Jews lived in Norway in the inter war period, living mainly in Oslo and Trondheim.⁵ The first Zionist association in Oslo was formed in 1904 and this was the first of several attempts to establish a lasting Jewish national movement in Norway. In 1912 *Norsk Zionistforening* was formed. Except for some interruptions it existed until the outbreak of the Second World War, and in the reports to the Zionist congresses the association was characterised as a part of the General Zionists.⁶ The aim of the organisation was to "work for Zionism" and the minutes of the meetings give us some indication of how the work was carried out.⁷ The work was divided in two parts.

The first main task was to be a part of financing a Jewish Palestine by selling shekels and by fund-raising campaigns for the KKL and the KH. In the twenties the average number of shekels sold was about 50. This is also a number which suggests how many of the Norwegian Jews supported the Zionist cause. The Zionist Organization wanted the local associations to hold particular campaigns to increase the sale but it seems that this was not done in Norway until in the thirties.

As for fund-raising the most important source of income to the KKL among the Norwegian Jews came from some blue boxes placed in private homes. These were meant to forge a link between those living in the Diaspora and the idea of redeeming the land. In the period between the two world wars, about one million boxes were to be found all over the world. Only a minority of the Norwegian Jews seems to have had one and the contributions were by all criterions small. In the twenties the average income per year was NOK 1,000. In addition to the income of the boxes a way of showing Zionist sympathy was to buy stamps, postcards and literature – all decorated with Zionist motifs. Obviously the material also served a propaganda cause. However, it did not sell very well in Norway.

The *Keren Hayesod* worked on longer term goals by making people to sign up for a larger contribution paid over a number of years. Even though most of the Norwegian Jews did not fulfil their pledges, the average income was higher than for *Keren Kayemet*. In the twenties the yearly average income was NOK 8,600.⁸ An important reason for the differences is that the *Keren Hayesod* during most of the period sent emissaries to Norway and for a time one person was working only for the Scandinavian committees. As with *Keren Kayemet* and *Norsk Zionistforening* the local committee of *Keren Hayesod* was passive in working for the Zionist cause. My research

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shows that the majority of the money was collected during visits from the headquarter or in the immediate time afterwards. It also indicates that the yearly contributions declined during the years, when there were no emissaries from the headquarters. Furthermore it seems that the emissaries' visits did not result in a more regular and extensive work for KH or in an increase of the number of people attending the meetings of the Zionist association. Reports from the emissaries confirm that they found themselves necessary for sustaining the work of *Keren Hayesod* in Norway.⁹ In the Norwegian Jewish magazines the work of KH is barely mentioned, and when the Zionist association revised its statutes in 1936 the KH was not a priority.

The other major task was information about the Zionist movement in general and the work that the Norwegian Jews gave particular priority to. This was important to convince potential contributors but it was also necessary to spread knowledge and understanding of the cause in general. The highly irregular meetings of the Zionist association were the most important instrument along with the emissaries. Judging by the minutes and the magazines, the majority of the Zionists must to a certain extent have been without basic knowledge about the Zionist ideology, movement and work. This is also expressed by a letter from a Norwegian representative to the Zionist Organization:

The revival felt during the war has been only of a nature of a philanthropic activity: the "Nouveaux riche" got pity on their "humble brethren" in foreign countries and hurried to their assistance with bundles of old clothes, pittance of money or by alms for Zion, which as intimated may also be useful as relief. A clear national consciousness was lacking there altogether and for that reason there is also a lack of sense of Organization.¹⁰

Contrary to Zionist associations in other countries important elements of the Zionist ideology were never discussed or were treated superficially. The concept of the "new Hebrew", the "new Jewish man bound to his ancestral home of *erez Israel*, cultivated by a specifically Zionist form of Bildung" as opposed to the "Jew of the ghetto" was not stressed.¹¹ The knowledge in modern Hebrew was almost non-existent and there was an indifference to learning it. None of the Norwegian Zionists, in contrast to others, ever changed his (sur)name to a Hebrew name.¹² Except for Chaim Bialik, there was also a lack of interest in particular Zionist literature and poetry. The Zionist sports movement, the Maccabi World Organization, was never established in Norway because competition with the youth association's sports department was not wanted. However, the *Maccabia*, the Jewish Olympic Games, had Norwegian participants on two occasions in the thirties.

The last two important elements in the Zionist work were the use of the movement's leadership as idols and the use of certain symbols. The most important Zionist idol and symbol was Theodor Herzl, accentuated by his early death. It is interesting to note that Herzl was used as a common denominator not only among the Norwegian Zionists. At the meetings in the

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Zionist association “Herzl” as a topic only appeared on two occasions. But he also was a topic in the non-Zionist youth association and in the magazines. Extracts from his books were printed and articles dealing with him praised him as a man with almost divine qualities. A central theme was that Herzl made it honourable to be a Jew because he brought back national pride among the Jews.¹³ He was being portrayed as the one who saved the Jews from destruction, and the author seems to have forgotten that Herzl saw Zionism as a political movement rather than a religious or cultural one. This tells us that the magazines, despite their non-Zionist appearance, were a part of building an image of Herzl that had nothing to do with reality. It also tells us that this image may have been used for other purposes than a purely Zionist one, and it is likely that he also functioned as a symbol of unity in general for the Norwegian Jews. Apart from the role of Herzl it appears that the Norwegians used few other Zionist symbols. The national anthem *Hatikvah* and the Star of David were used to a certain extent but there is reason to ask whether these were regarded as Zionist symbols or if they were perceived as important to preserve Jewish culture in general.

3. A change? The second half of the thirties

The quality and scope of the Zionist work changed and increased as Hitler gained power in Germany. Although *Aliyah* to Palestine became slightly more common and a family actually emigrated for good, the increase had more immediate consequences: There was a closer contact with the Zionist Organization, the meetings in the Zionist association were held more regularly and the content was more pronounced Zionist. This can most clearly be seen in the work of WIZO – the Women’s International Zionist Organization.¹⁴ Examples of topics are “the structure of the Zionist Organization”, “the female contribution to the economic life in Palestine” and Leo Pinsker’s book *Self emancipation*. The members also got an introduction to Zionism in general in addition to the different Zionist parties and their importance for the Zionist work. The meetings illustrate the level of activity and knowledge attainable.

The new statutes of the Zionist association also bear witness to a higher degree of commitment. To “work for Zionism” was now interpreted as prioritising *Keren Kayemet* and *Hachschara* financially and to spread propaganda for the Zionist cause.¹⁵ At the celebration of the 25th anniversary of *Norsk Zionistforening* a plan was launched to set up a fund that should be used for buying land. The idea was that other settlers should cultivate the land until Norwegian Jews wanted to emigrate to Israel. However, I have found no signs of the idea being realised. Furthermore, the number of shekels sold increased to about 200 a year. This was higher than the world average per capita. One of the reasons for the increase is that the Zionist association now promoted the sale of shekels by separate campaigns. The fact that the Zionist Organization lowered the number required to participate at the congresses to 200 was probably also a significant element.¹⁶ This adjustment led to a Norwegian participant for the first time at the congress in 1937.¹⁷ From the early thirties the headquarters of *Keren Kayemet* and *Keren Hayesod* began sending emissaries representing both of them and the amounts raised for KKL and KH

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increased, the former by 50 %. The Norwegian Jews also began to give money for other Zionist related causes. Finally, by looking at the meetings of the youth association it is clear that they became more pronounced Zionists, although they still declared themselves as non-Zionist.

The increase in activity was also demonstrated by the Zionists being more aware of trying to influence the opinion of the Norwegian society and the government. Julius Samuel, who served as the rabbi of the biggest congregation in Oslo, on several occasions held lectures on Jewish topics, including Zionism, in non-Jewish forums as well as writing articles in non-Jewish magazines. Furthermore, the increase was expressed in 1936 by a wish of the Norwegian Zionists for pioneers to come to Norway for training in manual labour. The idea of physical labour as a part of redeeming the soil was also central to the "New Hebrew" and in Sweden and Denmark such work already existed. At the time it only gave work to two people but two years later the Zionist association tried to get residence permits for a group of German Jews who wanted to get agricultural training at Norwegian farms. The attempt failed because of Norwegian refugee policy.¹⁸ The experiences gained in the other Scandinavian countries showed that obtaining immigration permits in to Palestine after finishing training could be very difficult.¹⁹

The Norwegian government was also approached directly on at least one occasion. In 1939 *Norsk Zionistforening* took action against what they perceived as a *de facto* withdrawal of the Balfour Declaration to fulfil Arab claims. Representatives of the Zionist association were granted audience with the Foreign Minister Halvdan Koht (Labour) where they presented a memorandum. This memorandum ended with a statement that saying that the fulfilment of the Balfour Declaration was an act of international justice as well as a step toward a policy of humanity and reconciliation and put forward a request for the Norwegian Foreign Minister to support the Zionist cause.²⁰

A Norwegian and a Jew

Given my previous description, the next step is to investigate the causes of the extent of the Zionist undertaking in Norway. There is no doubt that the general knowledge of Zionism was very limited and that it might have been confused with charity. At times internal conflicts made co-operation difficult. However, I believe that the most important causes can be found in particular Norwegian-Jewish circumstances.

Jewish – in the sense of being of Mosaic persuasion – immigration only became legal in 1851. The majority arrived between 1910 and 1920 as a result of the Russian pogroms and accordingly the Norwegian Jews were of East-European origins. In the inter war period they were still busy settling down. The settlement took place on two levels: Firstly they were individuals who had to adjust to the Norwegian society, its rules, culture, way of living and demands. In Eastern Europe they were not allowed to be anything but Jewish, something that was expressed in restrictions of places where they could live and positions they could hold. In many ways they met opposite demands in Norway. The Norwegian society was very homogenous and the tolerance of strangers low. Indirectly an ability to adapt was required, but at

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the same time it seems as if the Jews adapted willingly. The fact that Yiddish was abandoned in favour of Norwegian, that they made their surnames more Norwegian and that "Norwegian" athletic activities such as cross country skiing and ski jumping were popular are all examples of this willingness. Also, there was no Jewish organisation that protected particular Jewish interests. When necessary, this was carried out by the largest congregation in Oslo. At the same time it seems that the process of outward integration did not happen at the expense of being Jewish – both culturally and religiously. As the time passed the Jews became more integrated but there is nothing that suggests that the majority of them was assimilated at the outbreak of World War II. It appears that holding on to being Jewish was important even though the Jews gave priorities to different areas at different times in accordance with the integration process.

The particular emphasis of holding on to being Jewish in the Norwegian society brings us to the other level of the integration process. At the same time they had to establish themselves as a religious and cultural community. From being a part of an East European Jewish tradition, they had to make their own Norwegian Jewish tradition. The most significant factor seems to have been the establishment of a religious community, which was accompanied by institutions like a synagogue, a funeral company, and a religious school. Obviously this was most important for the religious life but it must also have been regarded as important for maintaining a cultural life. The founding of charitable funds, an orphanage, yearly holiday camps for poor Jewish children, a youth association and a women's association are also examples of contributions in that respect. So are more temporary tasks, such as theatre and sports groups.

This brief outline illustrates a community with few human resources that still was busy settling down. And it is an explanation of why Zionist work was not a priority. Given the fact that the majority of the Jews belonged to the working class and the general conditions in the Norwegian society during the twenties and until late thirties the financial resources also must have been a major problem. However, this does not imply that the Norwegian Jews were anti-Zionist or indifferent to Palestine becoming Jewish. In all likelihood there was not even a competition between the domestic undertakings and the Zionist work although it might be that some of the most conscious Jews were worried that Zionism – especially if *Aliyah* to Palestine became a more pronounced goal – would develop into a threat when it came to sustaining a Jewish community given the small number of Jews living in Norway. But this threat cannot have been perceived as very big because the religious establishment, with one exception, never opposed the Zionist work. Several of the rabbis serving in the congregation were pronounced Zionists and one of them also was a member of the board of the Zionist association in the late thirties.²¹

The last two elements that explain the extent of Zionism in Norway are the conditions in Palestine on the one hand and the statutes of the Zionist Organization on the other. Periodicals brought positive reports on the development of a Jewish Palestine but at the same time they pointed out that immigration implied a lower standard of living and less comfort than in Norway.²² In addition, few of the Norwegian Jews fulfilled the criteria the

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Zionist Organization and the British set up for immigration. Immigration was not to exceed the economic capacity of the country at the time to absorb new arrivals. This implied that there were increasing restrictions on Jewish immigration under the British Mandate during the whole period. The rising Arab nationalist aspirations also contributed to the restrictions. Among other things the majority of the Norwegians did not have the net capital required or did not possess the wanted professions.

I have mentioned earlier that the statutes of the Zionist Organization did not favour countries with a small Jewish population. The organisation also strikes me as not being very flexible. The statutes were standardised and valid for every country without taking into consideration the number of Jewish citizens, their social status or other elements that might have been important for the extent of Zionist activity. The demands made on the Zionist association and the work expected to be done seem to have been of a standard that the Norwegian Jews could not live up to economically, nor when it came to knowledge or human resources. On several occasions I have seen examples of the headquarters of *Keren Kayemet* setting up goals for the Norwegian Jews that were almost impossible to achieve. The same goes for the number of shekels required to be sold. On one occasion the Zionist Organization was of the opinion that it should be possible to sell 1000 shekels in Norway. Given the fact that only persons over the age of 18 could buy one and that each person could buy only one it is obvious that the goal was unattainable. The lack of flexibility of the Zionist Organization is also confirmed by reports from emissaries visiting Norway. They recommended that the Scandinavian Jews should have material particularly directed towards them as language and knowledge were a problem. The headquarters never complied with the request.

Conclusions

Zionist work has existed in Norway since 1904. Until the second half of the thirties the work was characterised by irregularity and lack of knowledge. Zionism was regarded as a kind of charity which had a low priority compared with domestic work in the Jewish community. However, it is my impression that a change took place in the second half of the thirties and that a distinct Zionist work on a larger scale started to develop. Obviously this change can also be interpreted as a kind of relief or charity – now expanded to suffering Jews in Germany or German occupied territories. The increase in the contributions to *Keren Hayesod* and *Keren Kayemet* can be explained as an acceptance of the need for a territory for refugees to settle down.

But it also might be that the persecution of Jews in a civilised country such as Germany made the Norwegian Jews realise that the emancipation was a failure and thereby ignited the Zionist fire among the Norwegians. The participation in the Zionist congresses is one indicator. The fact that several of the undertakings mentioned above can be characterised as long-range also underlines the new understanding of Zionist work. And so does the revised statute of 1936. Now the work for *Keren Kayemet* – a more outspoken Zionist enterprise designed to build up Palestine over a long time – had first priority.

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3. A change? The second half o

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Conclusions

Fußnoten

zur Startseite

1 Laqueur, Walter: *A History of Zionism*. New York 1972, 106.

2 Figures that illustrate this are that in the year 1923/24 about 300,000 shekels were sold. The next year the number was doubled, while in 1931/32 only 152,000 were sold. In 1938/39 1,052,000 shekels were sold. (The figures are taken from the different reports to the Zionist Congresses in the inter war period. These reports can be found in the Central Zionist Archive in Jerusalem.)

3 The term *Aliyah* – immigration to the land of Israel – was used in this period to describe both the permanent immigration of Jews from Diaspora and those who stayed in the area more temporarily.

4 Cited in Laqueur 1989, see footnote 1, 198.

5 For a comprehensive account of the Jewish society in Norway see Mendelsohn, Oskar: *Jødenes historie i Norge gjennom 300 år*. Oslo 1986/87. In 1910 there were 1,905 Jews (of mosaic persuasion) living in Norway. Ten years later the number was 1,457, while in 1930 the number was 1,359.

6 At the same time a Zionist association in Trondheim was established. As the sources for this association are scarce there is less knowledge about it, but it seems that it has roughly the same story as the one in Oslo. As there were far more Jews in Oslo than in Trondheim it might be that the latter Jews were more positive inclined towards the Zionist movement as they managed to collect more money. Given the fact that the majority were members of the working class it is worth noting that a particular Jewish socialist commitment, common in other countries, was lacking altogether among the Norwegian Jews.

7 The minutes are printed in the Norwegian Jewish magazines issued in the inter war period: *Hatikwoh*, *Israeliten* and *Jødisk Tidende*.

8 The sources for the thirties are scarce and make it impossible to assess the average income.

9 Central Zionist Archives, Z4/2577, report from Martin Rosenblüth to Zionist Organization, 14.4.1923.

10 Central Zionist Archives, KH4/9835, letter from T. Cymbal/Trondheim to Zionist Organization, 2nd Adar 5682 [March 1922].

11 Berkowitz, Michael: *Zionist Culture and West-European Jewry Before the First World War* Chapel Hill 1993, 99.

12 Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, credited with the revival of Hebrew as a modern language, was originally named Eliezer Perelman. His surname must be considered very symbolic for a man born in Lithuania: Ben-Yehuda means „son of Juda“, in other words „son of Israel“.

13 An example is Koritzinsky, Harry: „Theodor Herzl“. In: *Israeliten*. 10-11 (1924), 15.

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A Norwegian and a Jew

Conclusions

Fußnoten

zur Startseite

14 WIZO was established in 1920. Among other things its aim was to improve the women's social status and to support Jewish and Zionist education. The Norwegian branch was established in 1937 and is in itself an example of the increase in Zionist work among the Norwegian Jews.

15 A *Hachschara* was the organised training for Jews to become farmers, manual labourers, asf. in Palestine. A person who had finished such a training was called a *chalutz* or a *pionèr*.

16 Until then the number of sold shekels necessary to participate had varied between 1,000 and 2,000 per country or Zionist party.

17 In 1937 Isser Braude represented the Norwegian Zionists while Leo Hersson participated two years later. Earlier Norway had been represented by envoys from other countries. For example, in 1931 the Scandinavian countries, Colombia, Cuba, Mexico, Panama and Guatemala were represented by one person.

18 The Jews were never regarded as political refugees and therefore in general seldom permitted to stay in Norway The reason for the strict policy was a wish to avoid a „Jewish problem“ in Norway and the fear of the refugees being an economical burden for the society or a competitor on the labour market.

19 Paul Hammerich states that the period of 1933-1937 had a yearly group of 200-250 pioneers in Denmark. In the period 1933-1939 Sweden had had 489 pioneers. At the end of 1939 288 still remained in Sweden, only 109 had immigrated to Palestine and the rest had immigrated to other countries. (For Denmark see Hammerich, Paul: *Undtagelsen. En krønike om jøderne i Norden fram til 2. verdenskrig*. København 1992, 305. For Sweden see Glück, Emil: „Chalutstim i Sverige“. In: *Judisk Krønika*. 2 (1940), 22–23.

20 „De norske jødene protesterer mot den britiske regjeringens nye Palestinaprogram In: *Hatikwoh*. 4 (1939), 2–3.

21 The individual opponent mentioned in my sources was the rabbi of the smallest congregation in Oslo. He was an Agudist and a member of such an association in Norway. *Agudat Israel* is the political arm of traditional Jewish Orthodoxy. They are hostile to Zionism arguing that the Jews constitute a religious community defined by the Tora and not a nation in the common sense. A Jewish Palestine should be a creation by God, not by people.

22 As an example see „Innvandring og arbeidsforhold i Erez Israel“. In: *Hatikwoh*. 4 (1934), 1–2.